

Bacon, Francis

by Margarita Cappock

Bacon, Francis (1909–92), artist, was born 28 October 1909 at 63 Lower Baggot St., Dublin, second eldest of three sons and two daughters of Anthony Edward ('Eddy') Mortimer Bacon, and his wife Christina Winifred ('Winnie') Loxley Firth, both of England. His father, a former captain in the British army, and a collateral descendant of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), moved to Ireland to breed and train racehorses. His mother was from a wealthy Sheffield family. The Bacon family was based in Co. Kildare, where they rented Canny Court House, a large residence near Kilcullen. During the first world war, the Bacon family moved back to London. On their return to Ireland, they lived at Straffan Lodge, near Naas, Co. Kildare. Owing to Bacon's chronic asthma as a child, his formal education was sporadic. He received lessons from a private tutor at home and briefly attended Dean Close, a boarding school in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, from 1924 to 1926.

At the age of 16, following a disagreement with his father, Bacon left Ireland and went to London. In 1927–8 he travelled around Europe, going first to Berlin and then Paris, where an exhibition of drawings by Picasso inspired him to become an artist. He also saw the painting 'Massacre of the innocents' by Nicholas Poussin at Chantilly. This work showed him how the human scream could be captured in paint. Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein's famous film *Battleship Potemkin*, first released in 1926, also had a major impact on Bacon. The blood-splattered face of the screaming nurse in this film was an enduring image for the artist and one that featured in many of his paintings, most significantly 'Study for the head of a screaming pope' (1952) and 'Study for the nurse in the film *Battleship Potemkin*' (1957).

On his return to London around 1928/9, Bacon started to design ultra-modernist furniture and rugs. He achieved some renown in this field. In 1930 the *Studio* magazine published a feature on his furniture designs under the heading 'The 1930 look in British decoration'. Despite such recognition, Bacon soon abandoned his work as a decorator to concentrate solely on painting. Around this time, he became involved with Eric Hall, a wealthy businessman, who provided financial and emotional support to Bacon for almost fifteen years. In 1932–3 he moved to the Fulham Road and then to Royal Hospital Road in Chelsea, where he painted 'Crucifixion' (1933), his first significant work. This painting was reproduced in the book *Art now* by the influential art critic Herbert Read, and was immediately bought by a collector. In 1936 his work was rejected for the International Surrealist Exhibition at the Burlington Galleries, London, by one of the show's organisers, Roland Penrose, who considered it insufficiently surreal. However, in 1937 Hall organised a show of ten 'Young British painters' at Thomas Agnew & Sons, a London art gallery, and Bacon exhibited three recent works at this exhibition.

With the outbreak of the second world war in 1939, Bacon volunteered for civil defence and worked full time in the ARP until he was forced to resign because of worsening asthma. In 1942 he moved into the ground floor of 7 Cromwell Place, South Kensington, where he painted several major works. His 'Three studies for figures at the base of a crucifixion' (1944) established him as a new force in post-war art. Between 1946 and 1949 Bacon took part in several mixed shows and also spent time in Monte Carlo. In 1948 the Museum of Modern Art, New York, bought one of his works. The following year he had a one-man show at the Hanover Gallery in London, and he continued to exhibit with this gallery through the 1950s.

In London Bacon met Peter Lacy, a former fighter pilot, with whom he embarked on a long and tempestuous relationship. They spent lengthy periods in Tangier together in the 1950s. In 1951 Bacon left Cromwell Place and for the next ten years worked from a number of studios in London, most of them borrowed from friends. In 1953 he had his first one-man show abroad, at Durlacher Brothers in New York. The following year he exhibited in the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, along with Ben Nicholson and Lucian Freud. In 1957 he held his first one-man show in Paris, at the Galerie Rive Droite. From 1960 on, the Marlborough Gallery in London represented him.

In 1961 Bacon moved to 7 Reece Mews, South Kensington, his principal home and studio until his death. He painted his first big triptych, 'Three studies for a crucifixion' (1962), there. The triptych format became his preferred mode of presenting portraits. His first major retrospective was held at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1962. On the eve of the opening, Bacon learned of the death of Peter Lacy in Tangier. In 1963 a retrospective of the artist's work was held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and subsequently at the Art Institute in Chicago and the Contemporary Art Association in Houston. Around this time Bacon became involved with George Dyer, the subject of many of Bacon's finest portraits of the male nude. In 1965 an exhibition of his work was held at the Kunstverein in Hamburg and subsequently travelled to Stockholm and the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin. The following year Bacon was awarded the Rubens prize from the town of Siegen in Germany, the only award he was to accept during his lifetime (he was also awarded a Carnegie award in painting from the Pittsburgh International Exhibition, which he refused). At an exhibition of his paintings in New York in 1968, all the works were sold in the first week. Bacon's most important exhibition was held at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1971. Two nights before the opening, George Dyer was found dead in the bathroom of a Parisian hotel, where he had died from a drug and alcohol overdose. This event was to haunt Bacon for the rest of his life and inspired some of his greatest paintings, such as 'Triptych, May–June 1973'.

In 1974 Bacon began a lasting friendship with John Edwards (1950–2003), whom he made beneficiary of his will. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Bacon had a number of important exhibitions, including one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1975), a second retrospective at the Tate Gallery (1985), and several major

international touring exhibitions. In 1988 he became the first living western artist to have a retrospective in the Soviet Union, at the New Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. On 28 April 1992 Francis Bacon died from a heart attack in Madrid.

Francis Bacon is widely regarded as the most important artist to have emerged in post-war Britain. His sources were both art-historical and contemporary, and included paintings by Velazquez (especially the portrait of Pope Innocent X which, it seems, Bacon only saw in reproduction), Michelangelo, Van Gogh, the photography of Eadweard Muybridge, cinema, literature, and medical imagery. Frequently described as violent and disturbing, his paintings concentrate on the human body, injury, and isolation. While Bacon was a figurative artist, he rarely accepted commissions or painted from life. His portraits are of close friends and lovers. His work – which now sells for record sums – is represented in all major collections. In 1998 Edwards presented Bacon's Reece Mews studio to Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, where it was reconstructed.

David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (4th ed., 1993); Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: anatomy of an enigma* (London, 1996; New York, 1997); *Francis Bacon in Dublin* (2000); David Sylvester, *Looking back at Francis Bacon* (2000); *Times*, 6 Mar. 2003 (obit. of John Edwards); Margarita Cappock, *Francis Bacon's studio* (2005)