

PICASSO BACON

What It Feels Like
to Be Human

250 ALBERTINA

Exhibition Facts

Duration	18. September 2026 to 31. January 2027
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Curator(s)	Gunhild Bauer, Michael Peppiatt
Exhibits	71
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Contact	Albertinaplatz 1 1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83 0 presse@albertina.at www.albertina.at
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Press Contact	Veronika Werkner T +43 (0)1 534 83 512 M +43 (0)664 78976934 v.werkner@albertina.at Daniel Benyes T +43 (0)1 534 83 511 M +43 (0)699 12178720 d.benyes@albertina.at

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Picasso – Bacon

What It Feels Like to Be Human

This major show undertakes an exciting juxtaposition of the 20th century's two most important figurative painters: Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon.

Bacon was inspired to become a painter by Picasso's works. Throughout his life, he would compete with him, eventually striving to surpass him. Bacon wanted to be the late 20th-century version of what Picasso was to its first half: a chronicler of being human in all of its tornness.

Both of these seminal artists placed human existence at the core of their pictorial worlds. The subject they shared was the human figure – pulled apart, thrown back together, and reinvented with an unprecedented savagery. In their distorted portrayals, they elucidated pain, desire, and vulnerability, holding up a merciless mirror to the modern soul. To both, themes such as crucifixions, screams, bullfights, nudes, and the Tears of Eros revealed the drama of life itself.

Although Picasso himself was not influenced by Bacon, he closely followed his career. About 70 key works from international museums and private collections – from Chicago to Mexico City to London, Paris, and Stockholm – illustrate in an impressive confrontation the similarities in the oeuvre of the two masters and Picasso's significance for the subsequent generation of artists.

Chapter Texts

Introduction

In 1927, Bacon traveled to Paris. For Picasso, it was an exceptionally creative year, during which he, inspired by Surrealism, took to working on erotic, biomorphically distorted nudes. An exhibition of Picasso's works in the Seine metropolis, which conveyed to the 17-year-old Bacon "what it feels like to be human," motivated him to become an artist as well. This first encounter with the most innovative figurative artist of the twentieth century would shape Bacon for the rest of his life. For the second half of the century, he would become what Picasso had been for the first: a mirror of the modern soul and of the human catastrophe of two world wars. In 1962, Picasso, who was himself unaffected by Bacon, let the latter know that he had "liked" his work—"some of it very much."

This exhibition brings together what are actually two singular giants of figurative art. Picasso, a virtuoso draftsman, was deeply rooted in modernism and the rejection of academic norms. Bacon, a self-taught artist, meticulously prepared his paintings, in which he revisited the old masters in terms of dimensions, dark atmosphere, and brushwork, yet also incorporated elements of chance. In their aggressiveness, materiality, and vitality, they measure themselves against Abstract Expressionism.

With the full force of their works, this joint exhibition, however, focuses on the two artists' shared motifs and mindsets, which were rooted in Picasso's contribution to Surrealism. Both artists depict humanity's primal instincts, including art itself. Both aim directly at intellect and emotions alike. Keys turning in locks, gaping mouths, and wrestling matches encode sexual content. Anti-bourgeois and anti-clerical, both subvert religious rituals, obsolete sexual morality, sadism, and violence. They consistently take political stances, record autobiographical elements, and address humanity's great existential questions regarding sexuality, death, and the meaninglessness of existence. Above all, however, despite two world wars, both continue to believe in the undiminished significance of humanity.

They rescue the human body from abstraction while simultaneously subjecting it to radical deformation, pushing it to the edge of the animalistic, depicting it in moments of convulsion and heightened sensation, always on the verge of mortal pain. The human figure is not an established constant. It is an entity of rupture, reinvention, and exposure. To ask what it feels like to be human does not mean to search for man's true nature, but rather to face its instability—the body as a mask, a wound, a scene of desire and violence, uncertain, fragile, and constantly changing.

This exhibition presents the principal themes explored by the two artists: the direct influence of Picasso's Surrealism on the young Bacon, their paraphrases of the old masters, portraiture and nude, the animalistic side of the human nature, the intoxication of eroticism, and death.

Sorcerer and Apprentice

Inspired by Surrealism, Picasso redirected his attention at the human figure. Employing a free, libidinous idiom, he looked beyond the beautiful form. Desires and fears distort the object, hinting at sexual content. Picasso admired the human statuettes of the Stone Age, to which art and psychoanalysis attributed an access to emotions uninhibited by civilization. Stimulated by a beach vacation with his wife Olga and his secret lover Marie-Thérèse, he painted soft, voluptuous bathers evoking erotic pleasure and emotional tension. For the Surrealists, from Dalí to Miró, the beach was the *genius loci* for illustrating obsessions and the primordial state of the earth. In his anti-war painting *Guernica*, Picasso made use of Surrealist-Cubist distortion to denounce human sadism.

Immediately after World War II, Bacon proved influenced by Picasso's Surrealist figuration. Bacon depicted his feelings with all their ambivalences and erotic obsessions. In physically overwhelming oil paintings with content that can be grasped only intuitively, he visualized the powerful emotions of his childhood—such as fear, hurt, defense, despair, impotence, and loneliness. He also expressed his rejection of authority figures, from his father to fascist dictators. His snarling, half-human creatures, rearing up with their last ounce of strength to let out an existential, archaic scream, reflect a postwar world marked by suffering and isolation. The news magazine *Time* fittingly entitled an article about an exhibition of this group of works by Bacon from 1953 with “Snapshots from Hell.”

Reinventing Tradition

In his late work, Picasso looked back on his *metier* as an artist. His reinterpretations of the old masters, along with Bacon's portraits of the Pope based on Velázquez, rank among the most famous paraphrases in art history. Given that abstract art was in its heyday in the 1950s, they made a plea for the future of figurative art.

Bacon combined the old with popular references such as the screaming nurse from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and photographs of fascist potentates. While Picasso's portraits from 1930 exhibit a seemingly archaic obscenity in their bluntness, in Bacon's work the mouth turns into a mere spasm, and the painting itself becomes the image's own scream. He questions the divinely legitimized power of the Pope and his father's authority. The wrestlers serve to obscure the explicit motif of the homosexual couple. The surprising combination of multiple quotations allows for subversion and travesty.

Picasso drew on the undisputed father of modernism: in 1863, Manet, in his *Luncheon on the Grass*, had juxtaposed a naked woman with two clothed men without mythological legitimacy. In his variations on the idyllic natural scenery, Picasso breaks away from his model: he analyzes, deconstructs, reconstructs, deforms, and destroys. Pop Art would logically carry this subversive iconoclasm further through its own appropriation of Picasso's work.

Beyond Resemblance

In 1937, with fascism rising in Europe, a turning point occurred in Picasso's work. As the Nazis waged a campaign against classical modernism, particularly Cubism, Picasso took it a step further toward what may be called "Surrealist Cubism." The human being, whose image he had already pushed to its limits in Cubism, was shaken to its core. In the darkness of his studio—a laboratory of horror—he displayed the portraits of Dora Maar and Marie-Thérèse Walter in densely grouped ensembles: dislocated facial features, shifted proportions, mouths like those of skulls. Deformation had become a form of aesthetic resistance.

Bacon turned to portraiture relatively late in his career, focusing on his closest friends, whose eyes and mouths he mercilessly distorted to reveal all of their facets and inner contradictions. He shaped his view of humanity in the seedy clubs of Soho, where bohemian life, crime, the homosexual scene, alcoholism, and gambling flourished side by side. In his triptychs, the same face repeats itself in a stereotypical manner, calling into question the stability of identity. Bacon presents himself as a "beaten person"—battered, exposed to the point of exhibitionism, made up, with half his face painted black, always mindful of death. Bacon wounds, flays, dissects, and destroys to the point of laceration, brutally bringing reality to the fore.

Man and Beast

Having encountered Surrealism, Picasso took to contrasting Christian morality with archaic myths and sacrificial rites, articulating primal human instincts and fears in his animal metaphors. His 1934 bullfight series is full of erotic allusions revolving around the play of power and submission in the game of love. The love triangle between Picasso, Marie-Thérèse, and Olga came to an end when his mistress got pregnant and his wife left him. During the Spanish Civil War and the occupation, Picasso's portraits would increasingly give way to skulls. The skull of the once-vital bull now embodied the threat of war and the omnipresence of death. Blood-red, flayed sheep skulls and cats devouring birds give expression to the deepest downfall of humanity.

Bacon adopted the bullring as a setting for his biography. With the wandering soul of a greyhound or bird, he commemorated his late partner, Peter Lacy. His new lover, George Dyer, is depicted crouching at the edge of the arena like a wild bull, setting his sights on his victim: terrifying, animalistic, and desperate all at once, consumed by existential fear. Bacon has painted here a devotional image of human sadism, the brutality of love and sexuality. More powerfully than Picasso, he stages the drama of life in painting.

Bodies in Extremis

An embodiment of painting, the female nude accompanied Picasso throughout the modern era. Quoting its pioneers of modernity, it became a testing ground for issues of modern style, while it was

always a vehicle of the historical significance of its time: Picasso achieved the highest degree of sexual expressiveness in the interwar period, when the nude, inspired by the Surrealist masterminds Breton and Bataille, found its fulfillment in myth in a manner resembling catharsis. It conveys the struggle of modern man between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, between wildness and reason. Picasso's late work focuses on the individual nude and the couple. Painting against the tides of time, he evoked the nude as a metaphor for art and creativity in large format, almost totemic in nature, from tender to obscene. In 1970, Picasso exhibited two hundred of these nudes at the Papal Chapel in Avignon.

In art as in life, Bacon, too, was fixated on the human body in its extreme states. His figures—whether writhing in pain or animalistic—are also pessimistic, marked by contemporary history. In the face of the meaninglessness of existence, humanity is “condemned” to radical freedom. In a manic dissection, organs seem to burst outward; figures are nailed to the canvas, mutilated into torsos, reminiscent of Picasso's biomorphic figures. On massive triptychs, the animalistic nature of humanity is laid bare. Confronted with death, Bacon ultimately painted the disintegration of the body. Both artists pushed the nude to the limits of pain and pleasure, life and death.

The Tears of Eros

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud posits that the family, the state, and society deprive people of Eros, sexual pleasure. Similarly, Thanatos, the destructive death drive, is said to be suppressed by law and order. Surrealism, on the other hand, deals with libidinal desire, taboos and their transgression, sadism and masochism, archaic sacrificial rituals, and unbridled morality. Picasso's exploration of these themes inspired Bacon to become a painter in the first place.

Picasso depicts sexual obsessions as a struggle between opposing pairs: the Dionysian versus the Apollonian, wildness versus reason, reality versus appearance. In his late work, he allows painting to flow and reach out of the picture. The canvas becomes an erogenous zone, while his alter ego is Eros.

Bacon, too, deliberately transgresses social norms regarding sexuality. Beginning in 1953, the homosexual love scene became his leitmotif. Two wrestlers illustrate how closely sex and violence are intertwined in his art. Death and feelings of guilt are ever-present themes. We still encounter Picasso's biomorphic forms, the unsettling scream, the gaping mouth.

Both artists' oeuvres are profoundly and consistently shaped by Surrealism, whose slogans still adorned the walls of the Sorbonne in 1968: “All power to the imagination!” – “Under the pavement lies the beach!” And Bacon points out as late as 1984: “Since Surrealism, well, really since Freud, realism is enriched through the unconscious. Picasso's little bathers on the beach are profoundly non-illustrative and, at the same time, profoundly real.”

Biografies

Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso was born in Málaga, Spain, in 1881. His father was an academic painter. Aged fourteen, Picasso was admitted to the Academy of Barcelona.

In 1900, Picasso visited Paris for the first time. The pictures of his “Blue Period” (1901–1904) revolve around love and death. In Montmartre he created the paintings of circus performers that characterize his “Rose Period” (1904–1906). Fernande Olivier, his nude model, became Picasso’s lover and companion. In 1907, inspired by the art of Cézanne and African, Oceanian, and Iberian sculpture, Picasso painted *Les Femmes d’Alger*, a work paving the way for Cubism.

Together with Georges Braque, Picasso developed Cubism, the most revolutionary avant-garde movement of the twentieth century, further. The motifs, rendered in ochre tones, were broken down into rhythmic, crystalline structures. Starting in 1912, Picasso began creating collages from newspaper clippings. He achieved his first successes.

During World War I, Picasso worked for the Ballets Russes and Jean Cocteau. In 1918 he married the Russian dancer Olga Khokhlova, and his first son, Paolo, was born in 1921. Following a neo-classical phase that began in Italy in 1917, he embraced stylistic pluralism, thereby breaking with the continuous stylistic evolution of European painting.

From 1923 to 1933, Picasso was drawn to Surrealism. André Breton saw in him a pioneer who, through Cubism, had expanded the possibilities of figurative painting to represent reality for the first time. Picasso painted ecstatic dancers and biomorphically distorted bathers; the Minotaur became part of his pictorial repertoire. He incorporated the unconscious and encoded sexual content. In 1927 he began an affair with seventeen-year-old Marie-Thérèse Walter, which he only made public after the birth of their daughter in 1935.

In response to the German air raids on the Basque town of Guernica in 1937, Picasso painted his eponymous anti-war painting that same year for the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris World’s Fair. At the same time, he was defamed in Nazi Germany at the “Degenerate Art” exhibition in Munich. Picasso was placed under surveillance in his Paris studio under the German occupation of Northern France. The photographer Dora Maar became his lover. Picasso now painted deliberately and exaggeratedly ugly, Surrealist-Cubist portraits of her and Marie-Thérèse Walter. This distortion was no longer a formal variation in the modernist sense, but was employed as a provocation and a form of aesthetic resistance in the face of rising fascism in Europe. Until the end of his life, he would remain in exile from Spain due to the regime of dictator Francisco Franco (1892–1975).

After World War II, Picasso joined the French Communist Party. From 1948 to 1955, he revitalized traditional ceramics in Vallauris in Southern France; he then moved on to Cannes and Avignon. His

“Dove of Peace” became a symbol known throughout the world. By 1943 he had moved in with the painter Françoise Gilot, with whom he had two children. When she left him in 1953, Picasso fell into a deep crisis. This marked the beginning of his late period, during which—at the height of abstract art—he took stock of such themes as bullfighting, the painter and his model, and authentic existence versus appearance, competing with the Old Masters as he made a case for figurative art and oil painting. In all he did he expressed his freedom as a painter. At the same time, he continued to advocate for peace through powerful, thought-provoking paintings.

In 1961, Picasso married Jacqueline Roque, a ceramics saleswoman forty-six years his junior, and settled with her in Mougins on the Côte d’Azur, where the artist, aged ninety-one, died of a heart attack in 1973.

Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon was born in Dublin in 1909 to English parents. His violent father, a former officer, bred racehorses. At age sixteen, Bacon was banished from his parents’ home because of his homosexuality.

In 1925, Bacon moved to London. In 1927/28 he traveled to Berlin and then spent a year in Paris. Picasso’s drawings at the Paul Rosenberg Gallery inspired him to become an artist. Bacon initially pursued a career as a furniture designer. The married businessman Eric Hall was his lover from 1932 to 1949. Bacon began painting as a self-taught artist.

During World War II, Bacon served in a London Air Raid Precautions unit. In 1943 he moved into a spacious studio on Cromwell Place in South Kensington. He was profoundly influenced by Picasso’s biomorphic bathers from the 1920s. During curfews and blackouts, he hosted parties and illegal gambling nights.

After the war, Bacon was signed by Erica Brausen’s Hanover Gallery in London. Once it was finally possible to travel freely again, he went to Monte Carlo from 1946 to 1950, primarily to gamble. He began his series of Popes based on Diego Velázquez’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*.

In 1952 he entered into a relationship marked by violence and humiliation with the bar pianist and former fighter pilot Peter Lacy. In 1951 and in 1952, Bacon visited his mother in South Africa. Bacon became interested in anti-colonialism and began to dream of the restoration of the original. Because of his *Two Figures*, which he painted in 1953 and which showed a homosexual couple, he was charged with indecency. With his pictures of queer identities, Bacon was a trailblazer at a time when homosexuality was still punished with imprisonment.

Having painted his dark, old-master-style works from photographs, he is considered a pioneer of Pop Art. The aggressiveness and materiality of his works identify him as a contemporary of Abstract Expressionism. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Bacon traveled frequently to Morocco, where homosexuality was tolerated. Bacon developed a free, rough painting style. In 1958 he was signed by the renowned Marlborough Fine Art Gallery.

In 1961, Bacon moved into a studio in Reece Mews in South Kensington. Littered with paint, dirt, and torn photographs, it became a source of inspiration for him; he gave up painting from life. Bacon achieved painterly virtuosity, working with meticulously prepared fabric impressions, paint squeezed directly from the tube, and garish, monochromatic backgrounds. Based on photographs, he painted highly distorted portraits of his friends, as well as at least one large-scale triptych each year. Shortly before Bacon's retrospective opened at the Tate in 1962, Peter Lacy died in Morocco as a result of his alcoholism. Bacon was now firmly established: in 1967, Paris regarded him as the most influential force in contemporary art, even ahead of Picasso.

In 1963, Bacon began a turbulent romantic relationship with George Dyer, a petty criminal from London. In 1971 a retrospective was dedicated to Bacon—following Picasso—at the Grand Palais in Paris. Shortly before the opening, Dyer died of an overdose of alcohol and medication. Racked with guilt, Bacon painted works that grappled with death. In the mid-1970s, he moved to the Marais district in Paris. In London, he developed a kind of father-son relationship with the young pub manager John Edwards.

In the 1980s, Bacon radically reduced the human body further, thereby continuing to draw on Picasso's biomorphic bathers from the 1920s. Beginning in 1987, he was in a relationship with the Spanish banker José Capelo. During a visit to Madrid in 1992, Bacon died of a heart attack at the age of eighty-two.

Guided tours

Samstag, 19. September | 11 Uhr
Samstag, 26. September | 11 Uhr
Samstag, 3. Oktober | 11 Uhr
Freitag, 16. Oktober | 11 Uhr
Freitag, 23. Oktober | 11 Uhr
Freitag, 27. November | 11 Uhr
Freitag, 9. Jänner | 11 Uhr
Freitag, 15. Jänner | 11 Uhr

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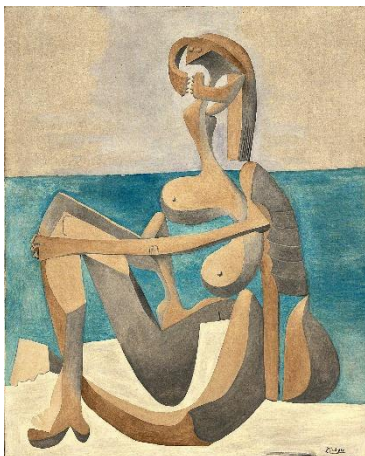
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Pablo Picasso
Bathers with a Ball, 1928
Oil on canvas, 33,1 × 19,2 cm
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Pablo Picasso
Figure by the Sea, 1929
Oil on canvas, 129,9 × 96,8 cm
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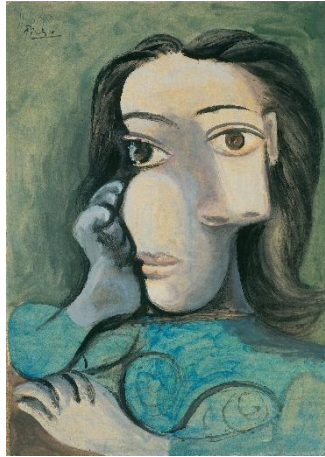
Pablo Picasso
Sitting Bather, 1930
Oil on canvas, 163,2 × 129,5 cm
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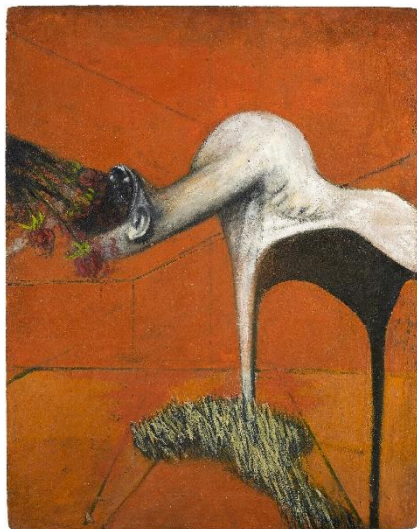
Pablo Picasso
Mother and Child (Study after Guernica), 1937
Oil on canvas, 130 × 195 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
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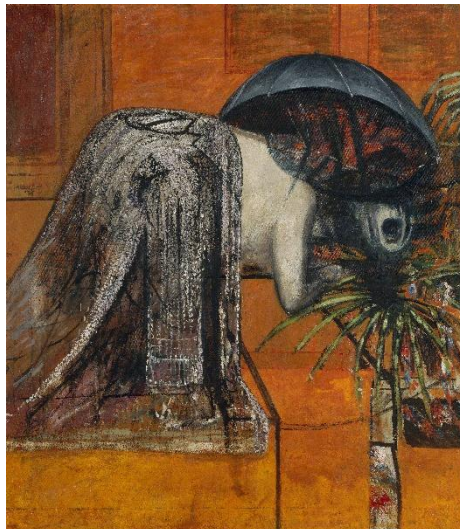
Pablo Picasso
Three Lamb's Heads, 1939
Oil on canvas, 65 × 81 cm
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Pablo Picasso,
Dora Maar, 1940
Oil on paper, 64 × 46 cm
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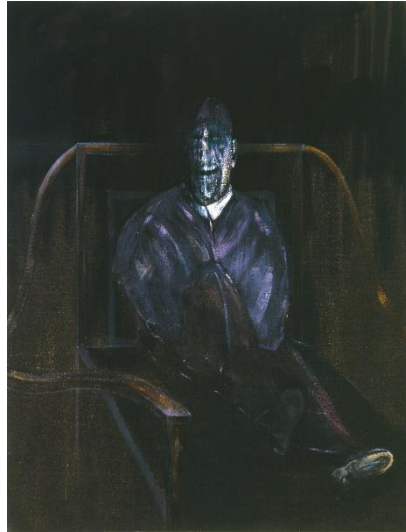
Francis Bacon
Study for a Figure ("Fury"), ca. 1944
Oil and pastel on fibreboard, 94 × 74 cm
Private Collection
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Francis Bacon
Figure Study II, 1945/46
Oil on canvas, 145 × 129 cm
National Gallery of Scotland, lent by Huddersfield Art Gallery
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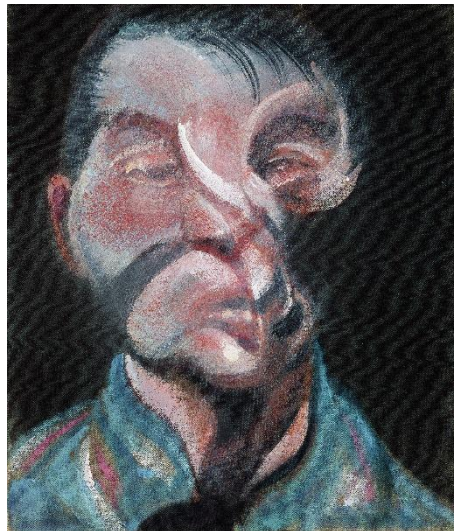
Francis Bacon
Study for a Portrait, 1949
Oil on canvas, 149,4 × 130,6 cm
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago
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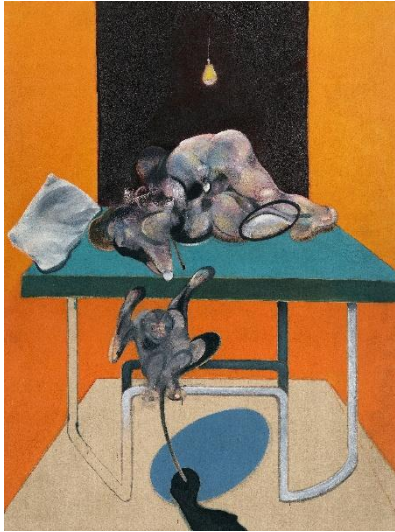
Francis Bacon
Figure Sitting, 1955
Oil on canvas, 152,5 × 117 cm
Stekelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.)
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Francis Bacon
Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne, 1967
Oil on canvas, 124,2 × 157,1 cm
Neue Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
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Francis Bacon
Self-Portrait, 1972
Oil on canvas, 35,5 × 30,5 cm
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Francis Bacon
Two Figures with a Monkey, 1973
Oil on canvas, 198 × 147,5 cm
Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo
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