



## **Portrait of R. J. Sainsbury (Robert Sainsbury)**

Francis Bacon

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**On display**

**Title/Description:** Portrait of R. J. Sainsbury (Robert Sainsbury)

**Artist/Maker:** Francis Bacon

**Born:** 1955

**Object Type:** Painting

**Materials:** Canvas, Oil paint

**Measurements:** Unframed: h. 1147 x w. 993 x d. 25 mm Framed: h. 1271 x w. 1120 x d. 85 mm

**Accession Number:** RLS 3

**Historic Period:** 20th century

**Production Place:** Britain, England, Europe

**Copyright:** © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved / DACS

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1998

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The painting was commissioned by Lisa Sainsbury and created in March 1955 at Bacon's studio in Mallord Street, off the Kings Road in London. It remained the only time that Bacon agreed to a commission and acknowledges the close relationship of artist to patron at this time. Robert Sainsbury sat for Bacon on successive days and Lisa recalled how cold it was when Robert arrived in his overcoat with sandwiches during his lunch break. [1] Bacon worked from life rather than his usual practice of working from photographs. In total, Robert Sainsbury went to the studio over a series of nine lunchtime sessions. [2]

This portrait should be viewed within the context of the many head studies that Bacon completed in the mid 1950's, such as *Three Studies of the Human Head*, 1953. In addition, in 1954 Bacon began a series of seven paintings under the shared title, *Man in Blue*, where a single male figure in a formal suit, collar and tie is shown against a blue-black ground. [3] As with the portrait of Robert Sainsbury, the suit has no colour other than the ground, so that only the face, shirt and tie emerge from the darkness.

This portrait is remarkable for the economy of composition. Bacon produced an image that, although is unmistakably a portrait of Robert Sainsbury, succeeds as an intense physiological exercise on his preoccupation with the human situation. This intensity of feeling is reflected in Bacon's interest in Rembrandt, particularly his self-portraits. Reflecting on the mystery of one such self-portrait he recalled Rembrandt's ability to create an image from 'non-rational marks, a coagulation of non-representational marks', which have led to making up this very great image. It is this profound quality one can see in this striking portrait of Robert Sainsbury.

By 1955 Bacon's reputation was steadily starting to grow. In January, he had his first solo institutional exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. In May, just after this painting was completed, Bacon was included in a group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In his contributing text in the catalogue Bacon commented, 'I would like my pictures to look as if a human had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and

memory trace of past events as the snail leaves its slime'. [4]

Calvin Winner, January 2020

[1] David Sylvester, *Trapping Appearance* (Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 1996), p.30.

[2] Steven Hooper (ed.), *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), (cat. 57), p.103.

[3] Hooper, p.104.

[4] Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in the 1950s*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p.166.

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## **Provenance**

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury directly from the artist via the Hanover Gallery, London, in 1955.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in October 1998.

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