



Sketch for a Portrait of Lisa

Francis Bacon

Not on display

Title/Description: Sketch for a Portrait of Lisa

Artist/Maker: Francis Bacon

Born: 1955

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Canvas, Oil paint

Measurements: Unframed: h. 610 x w. 549 mm Framed: h. 730 x w. 625 x d. 70 mm

Accession Number: RLS 4

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

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Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1998

Francis Bacon asked Lisa Sainsbury if she would sit for him, and thus began a remarkable series of portraits of which this painting is the earliest surviving example. After commissioning the portrait of Robert in 1955 (RLS 3), Lisa sat for as many as eight versions between September 1955 and 1957, three of the surviving portraits are in the Sainsbury Centre Collection (see also RLS5; RLS6). One further painting survived (*Lisa Sainsbury* [?] c. 1955, Private Collection) but the rest were destroyed in the rather ritualistic way Bacon would routinely cull his work during this period. [1] This example, *Sketch for a Portrait of Lisa*, is often referred to as the very best. The painting is also significant as it was the first time Bacon chose to depict a woman as the subject of a painting.

Painted in the autumn of 1955 when after years of a nomadic existence, Bacon found refuge with his friends, Paul Danquah and Peter Pollark. He settled in their flat at Overstrand Mansions, overlooking Battersea Park in London. It was here that Lisa came, recalling that, 'it was rather difficult to sit in that room'. 'There was so much on the floor it was jolly difficult to get to the chair without being covered in paint. He dried his hands on the curtain but there were always things on the floor everywhere - tubes of paint, brochures...'. [2] When David Sylvester asked Lisa if Bacon had work from photographs at all, as he usually did, her answer was emphatic, 'Never. They were done from my face'. [3] Remarkably, apart from when travelling, Bacon would stay in the spare bedroom of his friend's apartment until 1960 when he moved to Reece Mews.

The subject of the painting is shown emerging from a transparent curtain or screen created by vertical brushstrokes against the dark velvety background. Bacon called this device 'shuttering'. This series of vertical striations typical of his work of the fifties and providing depth to the picture whilst at the same placing the subject and spectator at greater distance.

Like most of his paintings from the period, the figure emerges from an infinite black background, illustrating Bacon's artistic debt to the Old Masters that he so admired. The handling of paint is also

characteristic and with an economy of strokes, Bacon was capable of creating the illusion that the viewer is witnessing the sitter rather than simply a painted likeness.

Observers have often remarked on the tenderness of the portrayal reflecting his affection for the sitter, and also its resemblance to the famous bust of the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti in the Neues Museum, Berlin. It may also relate to the painting, *Head*, 1956 (Private Collection), based on the head of Pharaoh Akhnaton which, although male, appears to relate closely to the portraits of Lisa and may have fused her image with that of the Pharaoh. Bacon visited Egypt on route to South Africa in November 1950 and considered the achievement of ancient Egyptian art unsurpassed in its visual hieratic power.

Calvin Winner, January 2020

[1] Steven Hooper (ed.), *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), (cat. no. 57), p.106.

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

[3] Sylvester, p. 30.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

This is Francis Bacon's first portrait of a woman and is also unusual in being painted from life, a practice that he soon abandoned in favour of painting from photographs. Born of a new friendship between the artist and the sitter, the portrait has a hieratic air that reflects Lisa's dignity and searching gaze. She was an intelligent woman of great refinement, with a deep respect for the creative impulse and a justified conviction about her own taste in aesthetic matters.

The portrait is founded on Bacon's scrutiny of her physical appearance, but like most of his portraits it also bears signs of his parallel interest in other images. Bacon was familiar with the Sainsbury collection of ancient sculpture and, as David Sylvester eloquently pointed out, "It resembles the sitter faintly; it strongly resembles Queen Nefertiti". Personally, I find the likeness more compelling than did Sylvester, but at this moment Bacon was also beginning to work on his series of 'Portraits of a Life Mask after William Blake'. The isolated and ghostly head of Sainsbury bears a certain resemblance to these paintings, while what Bacon called his 'shuttering' technique derives from his study of late Degas pastels.

In 1955 Bacon wrote, "Art is a method of opening up areas of feeling... A picture should be a recreation of an event rather than an illustration of an object, but there is no tension in the picture unless there is a struggle with the object. I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and a memory trace of past events as the snail leaves its slime." This 'recreation' of his encounter with Lisa Sainsbury is one of Bacon's early portrait masterpieces.

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Nicholas Serota, Chair, Arts Council England and Former Director, Tate

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Although Bacon painted this portrait from life, he often drew on photographs found in books. Lisa Sainsbury's portrait can be compared to a photograph of the bust of King Akhenaten, which was published in a book that Bacon owned. The portrait shares Akhenaten's heavy eyelids, hollow cheeks and sensual mouth, thus conflating Lisa with a pharaoh famous for instigating an artistic revolution.

Exhibitions

'Francis Bacon: Human Presence', National Portrait Gallery, London, 10/10/2024 - 19/1/2025

'Francis Bacon: Human Presence', Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, 14/2/2025 - 8/6/2025

Provenance

Gift from the artist to Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1955.

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