



## **Sketch for a Portrait of Lisa**

Francis Bacon

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**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

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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.

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## **Provenance**

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

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

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