



Head of a Man (Self-Portrait)

Francis Bacon

Not on display

Title/Description: Head of a Man (Self-Portrait)

Artist/Maker: Francis Bacon

Born: 1960

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Canvas, Oil paint

Measurements: Unframed: h. 852 x w. 852 mm Framed: h. 894 x w. 894 x d. 62 mm

Accession Number: 35

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

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Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

According to Robert Sainsbury the painting *Head of Man* is an early self-portrait, although in any case the likeness confirms the assumption. The matter is noted in a letter from Robert Sainsbury to Ronald Alley written in March 1962 in which Robert states, 'he [Bacon] himself told me it is a self-portrait. [1] However, it has been noted that Bacon's motives for the anonymous title and calling a half-length portrait a head is somewhat confusing. [2]

This is the third confirmed self-portrait by Bacon coming after *Self-Portrait*, 1956 (Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth) and *Self-Portrait*, 1958 (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.). Prior to that it has been suggested that *Portrait*, c.1930 (Private Collection) is a self-portrait, although Bacon denied it. In addition, *Seated Figure*, 1954 (Private Collection) is at least in part, a self-portrait. [3] It has also been suggested and it seems likely that identically titled, *Head of Man*, 1960 (Private Collection) is probably also a self-portrait too. This was painted at around the same time as this painting in the Sainsbury Centre Collection. [4]

It is likely the painting was started in Porthmeor Studios, St Ives, where Bacon resided between September 1959 and January 1960. It was probably finished back in London at Overstrand Mansions prior to the exhibition in March 1960. The canvas was first painted in viridian green, as used in *Head of Woman*, 1960 (Sainsbury Centre Collection), *Two Figures in a Room*, 1959 (Sainsbury Centre Collection), and all associated with his time in St Ives. There is also an unfinished canvas in the Francis Bacon Studio Archive, Hugh Lane, Dublin) painted in the same colour.

This period has been considered a transitional time in Bacon's work. However, it would prove to be an important step as in the next decade he staunchly defended his own standpoint with growing confidence backed up with technical virtuosity. Bacon painted many self-portraits and his concentration on the face lends a physiological intensity to the subject through the expressive paintwork and where paint and image are impossible to separate. When writing an introduction to the painter Matthew Smith, Bacon described this so,

'A complete interlocking of image and paint, so that the image is the paint and vice versa. Here the brushstrokes create the form and does not simply fill it in. Consequently, every movement of the

brush on the canvas alters the shapes and implications of the image. This is why real painting is a mysterious and continuous struggle with chance - mysterious because the very substance of the paint, when used in this way, can make a direct assault upon the nervous system; continuous because the medium is so fluid and subtle that every change that is made loses what is already there in the hope of making fresh gain'. [5]

The painting was purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury along with *Two Figures in a Room, Head of a Man, No.1.* and *Head of a Woman*, directly from the Marlborough Gallery, *Francis Bacon paintings 1959-1960*, in the spring of 1960.

Calvin Winner, January 2020

[1] Sainsbury Centre Archives

[2] Martin Harrison, *Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné* (London: The Estate of Francis Bacon, 2016), p.612

[3] Martin Harrison, p.384

[4] Martin Harrison, p.610

[5] Matthew Smith, *Paintings from 1909 to 1952* (Tate Gallery 1953), p.12

Exhibitions

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

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Marlborough Gallery, London in 1960.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
