



Head of a Woman

Francis Bacon

On display

Title/Description: Head of a Woman

Artist/Maker: Francis Bacon

Born: 1960

Materials: Canvas, Oil paint

Measurements: Unframed: h. 852 x w. 852 mm Framed: h. 894 x w. 894 x d. 64 mm

Accession Number: 36

Historic Period: 20th century

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Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The painting was completed in the lead up to his first exhibition with Marlborough Fine Art in the March of 1960. It may have been started or indeed completed in St Ives as the subject is believed to be a portrait of Mary Redgrave, wife of the artist William Redgrave who rented Bacon a studio in St Ives. [1] 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.

Only six paintings have been documented as being completed in St Ives (Alley). However according to Redgrave, a large number of unfinished canvases were shipped up to London and completed at Overstrand Mansions in time for the exhibition in March. Bacon was photographed in his studio prior to the exhibition by Cecil Beaton surrounded by some of the thirty-two paintings he showed at Marlborough that spring. Bacon completed seven paintings titled *Head of Woman* and this painting was catalogued in the exhibition as *no.30*.

He painted two further paintings, both identically titled, *Head of Woman*, 1960 (both in private collections) that relate closely to this painting and appear to be based on portraits of Mary Redgrave. The use of viridian green for the ground links many paintings from this period and the sitter appears in several portrait heads from the St Ives period. The broad expressive brushstrokes sweep around the left eye socket and provide a sense of a figure in motion, causing the nose and mouth to undertake disfiguration or what Bacon described as 'disruption' or 'distortion'. [2] His desire was that realism had to be re-invented and recalling one of van Gogh's letters to Theo, Bacon states [he] 'speaks of the need to make changes in reality, which become lies that are truer than literal truth. This is the only possible way the painter can bring back the intensity of the reality which he is trying to capture' [3]

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 Man (self-portrait)*, directly from the Marlborough Gallery, Francis Bacon paintings 1959-1960, in the spring of 1960.

Calvin Winner, January 2020

[1] Martin Harrison, *Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné* (London: The Estate of Francis Bacon, 2016), p.590

[2] David Sylvester, *Brutality of the Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (1993), p116

[3] Sylvester, 1993, p172

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.
