



# Head of Gerda Boehm

Frank Auerbach

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Head of Gerda Boehm

**Artist/Maker:** Frank Auerbach

**Born:** 1964

**Object Type:** Painting

**Materials:** Board, Oil paint

**Measurements:** Unframed: h. 610 x w. 610 mm Framed: h. 804 x w. 795 x d. 85 mm

**Accession Number:** 50635

**Historic Period:** 20th century

**Production Place:** Britain, England

**Credit Line:** Accepted in lieu of inheritance Tax by H M Government and allocated to the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 2015

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This portrait of Auerbach's older cousin Gerda Boehm is one of the most remarkable paintings in the Sainsbury Centre. Gerda and her husband escaped Nazi Germany in 1938 and emigrated to London. Auerbach came to England the following year. Sent by his parents when he was just eight years old, he escaped under the Kindertransport scheme. In 1943 Auerbach's parents were murdered in Auschwitz concentration camp. Gerda was the only surviving relative he saw after he had left Germany.

Painted in 1965, *Head of Gerda Boehm* is a seminal work of one of Auerbach's principle subjects. Boehm first sat for the artist in 1961 and continued sitting every week until 1982. Boehm, like all of Auerbach's sitters, are known to him and his astonishing technique demands sacrifice from the sitter as well as from the artist himself. Auerbach invests hours working on an individual painting through a process of applying and scraping back paint. Layer after layer is built up before the final form is fixed, quite literally as if the very essence of the subject becomes trapped in successive layers of paint. To literally fix his subject's psychological and corporeal presence in the thickly worked impasto. The completed work seems to bear witness to this emotionally and physically gruelling process.

A great painting, Auerbach stated, is like "a shape riding on its own melting into light and space; it never stops moving backwards and forwards." [1] He shared with his friend Francis Bacon the avoidance of making a portrait that is an illustration of the subject. Auerbach stated, 'I suppose I actually spoke about painting more with Francis Bacon than anyone else'. [2] Like Bacon, rather than a likeness, Auerbach wants to capture the essence or rather the presence of his subject. [3] But this is a game of chance and accident that blurs the boundaries of realism, expressionism, figuration and abstraction. He stated, 'there are certain configurations on canvas that feel organic and alive and quivering, and others that seem inert.' [4] 'I never visualise a picture before I start. I have an impulse and I try to find a form for that impulse'. [5]

Frank Auerbach was born in Berlin in 1931. He came to London in 1947 and in 1948 attended David Bomberg's evening drawing classes at the Borough Polytechnic Institute. Bomberg was an impressionable teacher on the young artist and significant early influence. He studied at St Martins School of Art, where he met Leon Kossoff, who was soon also attending Bomberg's classes. London-born Kossoff came from a family of émigrés and the two artists went on to study at the Royal College of Arts. [6]

Frank Auerbach emerged amongst the new generation of painters who built their reputations amidst the embers of war-torn London during the 1950s. The 'School of London', a term originally coined by Kitaj in 1976, re-emerged in the 1980s in an article in *Art International* in 198. A British Council exhibition in Oslo of the same year also used the term and finally by Alastair Hicks in his book called, *The School of London*. [7]

As well as Frank Auerbach, painters associated with the School of London included Michael Andrews, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, R.B. Kitaj, and Leon Kossoff. But Auerbach is probably as close to Alberto Giacometti in the pursuit of a particular form of realism emerging from intense focus in his studio practice over the last half century. [8] The relentless pursuit of capturing appearance was on a knife edge for Auerbach as it was for Bacon and Giacometti.

Calvin Winner, February 2023

[1] <https://www.martingayford.co.uk/category/journalism/artinfo/> , accessed 20/02/2023

[2] Martin Gayford, *Auerbach's London*, Apollo October 2009, p.61

[3] Calvin Winner, *Francis Bacon's portraiture: An act of portrayal, De visi mostruosi e caricature*, published in Italy, 2023, p.199

[4] <https://www.martingayford.co.uk/category/journalism/artinfo/>, accessed 20/02/2023

[5] Elena Crippa, *All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life*, (Editor), (Tate Publishing, 2018), p.16

[6] The Sainsbury Centre also contains a painting by David Bomberg, *Self-Portrait*, 1930 acquired in 1960 (437).

[7] Claudia Milburn and Calvin Winner, *Alberto Giacometti: A Line Through Time*, Sainsbury Centre, 2016, p. 76

[8] *The School of London: The Resurgence of contemporary painting*, Alastair Hicks, published, 1989

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## Further Reading

*All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life*, Elena Crippa, (Editor), (Tate Publishing, 2018)

*Frank Auerbach*, Tate Publishing, 2015

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