



# Study (Imaginary Portrait of Pope Pius XII)

Francis Bacon

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## Not on display

**Title/Description:** Study (Imaginary Portrait of Pope Pius XII)

**Artist/Maker:** Francis Bacon

**Born:** 1955

**Object Type:** Painting

**Materials:** Canvas, Hardboard, Oil paint

**Measurements:** Unframed: h. 1086 x w. 756 mm Framed: h. 1120 x w. 890 x d. 63 mm

**Accession Number:** 30

**Historic Period:** 20th century

**Production Place:** Britain, England, Europe

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**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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The theme of the pontiff is perhaps Bacon's most celebrated as well as notorious creation, and he painted numerous examples between 1949 and 1962 [1]. More often described collectively as 'screaming popes', they are more typically grinning or grimacing. This example on the other hand is noticeably expressionless and stony.

Painted towards the end of 1955 at Overstrand Mansions in Battersea, London, the painting owes its survival to Robert and Lisa Sainsbury. After meeting the artist at a party hosted by Erica Brausen (Bacon's gallerist), Bacon talked of a painting that he believed had gone well that day. The evening progressed and Robert and Lisa asked to see the painting, by which time Bacon was sounding less convinced, and by the time they reach his studio he wanted to destroy it. They argued for an hour pleading with him to spare the painting, with Robert stating, 'It's the most wonderful face ever', before Bacon took a razor blade and cut out the figure and simply said, 'take it away'. [2]

According to Robert Sainsbury, the figure was 'virtually completed except for the bottom part of the Pope's robes ... and also possibly the fingers of the right hand.' The hands, whilst seemingly unfinished, appear to show the Pope self-consciously playing with the Piscatory Ring, known as the Ring of the Fisherman, although the ring is not actually visible. The ring was an important part of the official regalia worn by the Pope on the ring finger of the right hand.

Parts of a perspectival box, a device used frequently at this period, can also be seen on the upper part of the canvas. [3] The space frame is present in most of the Pope paintings, recalling the evocative phrase, 'enclosed in the wretched glass capsule of the human individual', by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), one of Bacon's favourite books. [4]

The theme of the pope was inspired by the remarkable portrait of Innocent X by Diego Velázquez from 1650 [5], a painting on which Bacon commented, 'I've always thought that this was one of the greatest paintings in the world, and I've used it through obsession'. [6] He acquired endless reproductions of the Velázquez painting from books, but later claimed that he did not see the original when he visited Rome in late 1954. [7]

This painting relates more closely to the contemporary Pope Pius XII (Papacy 1939-1958), as does *Pope I*, in Aberdeen Art Gallery. [8] This assumption is given more credence by the addition of spectacles, something Bacon used in several portraits, often in relation to another of his favourite images, the screaming face of the nanny in Eisenstein's 1925 film, *Battleship Potemkin*. [9]

Images of Pius XII were certainly present in his studio. A photograph of Pius XII on his throne, being carried from St Peter's, appears in one of Sam Hunter's famous 1950 studio photomontages. [10, 11]. Seated on an elaborate papal throne decorated with gilded finials, the pope looks directly out at the viewer, a cold calculating figure if somewhat ethereal. Robert Sainsbury's reference to the face was perceptive and it is the painting's most captivating feature. It is articulated through Bacon's hallmark economy of paint but casts a haunting impression.

The face is shown emerging from (and partly fused with) a transparent curtain or screen, created by vertical brushstrokes against the dark velvety background. Bacon developed this device which he called 'shuttering'. The effect was to formalize the folds in background curtains into stripes so that they pass very emphatically through a figure. Given the painting's truncated format, it rightly gives the spectator the impression of a detail or crop, bringing the composition of the figure much further forward in the picture plane than would have been originally intended.

Calvin Winner, July 2020

[1] Steven Hooper (ed.), *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), (cat. 57), pp. 102-103.

[2] David Sylvester, *Trapping Appearance* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 1996), p.31.

[3] Hooper, p.103.

[4] Phaidon, website news, The truth behind Francis Bacon's 'screaming' popes. Review of Martin Hammer book, Francis Bacon: Phaidon Focus, 2013 on the artist.  
<https://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2013/february/08/the-truth-behind-francis-bacons-screaming-popes/> Accessed online, July 2020.

[5] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait\\_of\\_Innocent\\_X](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Innocent_X) Accessed online, July 2020.

[6] David Sylvester, *The Brutality of the Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, (London: Thames and

Hudson, 1987), third edition (first published 1975), p.37.

[7] <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/pope-i-study-after-pope-innocent-x-by-diego-velazquez-106598>  
Accessed online, July 2020.

[8] Sylvester, p.37. note. The painting of Innocent X by Diego Velázquez is in the Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome.

[9] Hooper, p.103.

[10] Sam Hunter, *Francis Bacon: The Anatomy of Horror*, Magazine of Art 45 (January 1952): 11-15

[11] <https://francis-bacon.com/content/sourcesource-material>

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## Exhibitions

'Iconic: Portraiture from Francis Bacon to Andy Warhol', Holburne Museum, Bath, 24/1/2025 - 5/5/2025

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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 1973 as part of the original gift.

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