



Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh I

Francis Bacon

On display

Title/Description: Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh I

Artist/Maker: Francis Bacon

Born: 1956

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Canvas, Oil paint

Measurements: Unframed: h. 1541 x w. 1156 mm Framed: h. 1642 x w. 1290 x d. 57 mm

Accession Number: 31

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

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Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The Van Gogh series was a watershed in Bacon's career. This example is the first, and one of the most highly regarded, of the series. The painting was completed in March or April 1956, some time before the others in the series [1], and is one of the most important paintings in the Sainsbury Centre Collection.

It was included in the celebrated exhibition at the Hanover Gallery in 1957, along with five other paintings relating to van Gogh. The accounts of the opening night in March 1957 have added to the Bacon mythology ever since. Two of the paintings had arrived very late and were still wet, the rooms so densely packed paint was smeared onto people and their clothes. The artist suddenly appeared to the crowd staunching a wound, after an object had fallen from the balcony on a man below and laid open his scalp. [2]

The spectacle and importance of the exhibition was palpable, as recalled by the painter Derrick Greaves who was present that evening. [3] Observers remarked on the unusual social mix typical at such occasions, with the room densely packed with artists, students,

collectors and 'teddy boys', no doubt attracted by the notoriety of the artist. But the critical response was remarkable; for the first-time universal praise from the critics. John Golding suggested that the exhibition confirmed Bacon's status as the 'most controversial and influential living English painter'. John Russell in *The Times* and Neville Wallis in *The Observer* both singled out the Sainsbury painting as the most successful. [4]

The series as a whole shows an expressionist use of colour and gestural paintwork possibly reflecting contemporary painting both in Europe and the USA. However, this picture is the more sombre of the group and relates more to the work of Chaim Soutine, whom Bacon greatly admired. The thickness of paint and the repeated reworking suggest that it took time for an image to coalesce out of the miasma. But the dark and brooding presence of the figure did materialise and now appears trapped in paint, with haunting eyes peering out from within. A black shadow surely signals death, little more than a stain, haunting what Bacon called the 'Phantom of the road'.

Van Gogh's self-portrait, *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*, 1888 (destroyed in WWII but formally Kaiser-Friedrich Museum, Magdeburg), is credited as the inspiration and was known to Bacon through coloured reproductions. *The Sower* of the same year ([Kröller-Müller Museum](#)) may also have played on his mind. 'I'd always loved that picture, the one that was burnt in Germany during the war - and as nothing else had gone right I thought I'd try to do something with it. Actually I've always liked early van Gogh best, but that haunted figure on the road seemed to be just right at that time - like a phantom of the road, you could say' [5]

Bacon may well have felt a strong identification with van Gogh as the quintessential artist in despair, given the fraught nature of his relationship with Peter Lacy at that time as well as lack of wider recognition for his art. Bacon was particularly fascinated by van Gogh's published letters, which were a constant source of inspiration. Bacon may well have also read Irving Stone's novel about van Gogh, *Lust for Life*, published in 1934. Bacon saw the MGM film adaption that came out in September 1956, notably after he made this work, but it may well have played on his mind as he produced the subsequent works. [6]

The figure and vegetation were once thought to have been cut-out from another canvas, although Bacon correctly later denied it. [7] Recent research has confirmed Bacon's account and the heavily textured painting is scrapped back with a palette knife. [8] The sombre palette is broken by the vibrant yellow of the straw hat and shoulder straps as well as the intriguing v-shaped red paint strokes, as if spelling out his hero's name.

Calvin Winner, July 2020

[1] Steven Hooper (ed.), *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), (cat. 62), p.113.

[2] David Allan Mellor, *Van Gogh by Bacon*, (Fondation Vincent Van Gogh-Arles, 2002), p.21.

[3] Personal communication with the author, June 2017.

[4] John Golding, *New Statesman and Nation*, vol. 53, no. 136, 6 April 1957, p.438.

[5] David Allan Mellor, p.22.

[6] David Allan Mellor, p.23.

[7] Ronald Alley, *Francis Bacon Catalogue Raisonne*, (Thames and Hudson, 1964) p.102.

[8] X-ray photography taken in 2008 (Sainsbury Centre Archives) confirmed the painting is indeed a single canvas.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1956 from the Hanover Gallery, London.

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