





# Two Figures in a Room

Francis Bacon

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Two Figures in a Room

**Artist/Maker:** Francis Bacon

**Born:** 1959

**Object Type:** Painting

**Materials:** Canvas, Oil paint

**Measurements:** Unframed: h. 1985 x w. 1420 mm Framed: h. 2103 x w. 1537 x d. 90 mm

**Accession Number:** 33

**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 crouching nude was a theme that Bacon had explored since he painted *Study for a Crouching Nude*, 1952. [1] Here the crouching figure is positioned in relationship to a reclining figure. This figure is painted with a green halo affect and has a somewhat spectral presence but nevertheless adds a suggestive charge to the composition. The painting shares many similar characteristics to *Lying Figure*, 1959 (Leicester) and *Walking Figure*, 1959 (Dallas).

Although the title indicates a room, gone are the claustrophobic interiors of the 1950s, replaced with a more expansive space and lighter palette. It has been suggested that Bacon may have been informed by several sources for his crouching figure. The famous carving of *Crouching Boy*, c.1530-4 by Michelangelo (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg) is one such source. [2] Matisse's *Bather with a Turtle*, 1908 (MOMA, New York) and Degas's, *After the Bath, Woman Drying Herself*, c.1890-95 (National Gallery, London) seem to be other possible sources, where the effect of the spine, 'almost comes out of the skin altogether' [3]. In addition, a contemporary press photo of a man being mauled by a lion is another possible source. [4]

This large painting is the only one in the collection painted on a scale that would become Bacon's standard large-scale format. It was also the first painting acquired since his switch to Marlborough Fine Art Ltd from the Hanover Gallery in October 1958. 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. This is supported by the fact the painting shows signs of having been taken off its stretcher, presumably for ease of transport. The canvas was first painted in viridian green (identical to an unfinished canvas in the Francis Bacon Studio Archive, Hugh Lane, Dublin).

The bottom two thirds of the painting are a mixture of red/pink, blue and white over green. This is worked into a stippled impasto, modulated using a cloth or rag and rich in studio detritus. A flattened band of paint along the very top edge suggests the painting may have been framed before it was completely dry and exhibited shortly after in his first Marlborough Gallery exhibition in March/April 1960.

Given both the scale of the painting and the colour field application of broad areas of paint, it is worth exploring contemporary developments in abstract painting. Earlier in 1959, the Tate Gallery had held New American painting exhibition, showing the work of Pollock, de Kooning and most relevant, Mark Rothko. It is inconceivable that Bacon did not go and see this high-profile London art event.

In addition, during Bacon's short stay in St Ives, British abstract painter Patrick Heron was working on large-scale abstract paintings in Porthmeor Studios in an adjoining studio. Bacon even spent Christmas day in 1959 at Heron's nearby home [5] That Bacon was experimenting during this period and adopting some of the tropes of abstract painting it has been considered a transitional time in his 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.

Calvin Winner, August 2020

[1] Martin Harrison, *Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné* (London: The Estate of Francis Bacon, 2016), p.564.

[2] Frank Althaus and Mark Sutcliffe, *Francis Bacon and the Art of the Past* (London, Fontanka, 2014), p.203.

[3] David Sylvester, *The Brutality of the Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (1993), pp.46-7.

[4] Harrison, p.564.

[5] Ben Tufnell, *Francis Bacon in St Ives: Experiment and Transition 1957-62* (Tate, 2007).

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## Exhibitions

Art Institute of Chicago 1964-01-24 to 1964-02-23

Moderna Museet, Stockholm. And MGoMA, Dublin

Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf 1972-02-18 to 1972-05-02

Portraits by Bacon and Giacometti from the RLS collection, 1996

Francis Bacon and the Art of the Past, Hermitage

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## **Provenance**

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

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

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